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The parables in Matthew

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THE PARABLES IN MATTHEW.

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Graduating Thesis.

Boston University School of Theology.

O U T L I N E .

I. Aim and Method.

2. Defintion of a Parable.

3. Miscellaneous general observations:

Quantity

Purpose

Arrangement.

4. The Parables that Mt has in common with Lk but not with Mk.

(a) what they are,

(b) setting,

(c) other differences,

(d) four inferences to be drawn from the differences.

5. The Parables that Mt has in common with Mk and Lk: What bearing do they have on our inferences?

6. The Parables Peculiar to Mt: the bearing of these? a fifth inference added.

7. The Parables Not Found in Mt: bearing of these?

8. Do the Mattheam peculiarities we have discovered in the parables obstruct or help our view of Christ? The vital question.

9. Practical Conclusion and Summary.

THE PARABLES IN MATTHEW.

The wording of our title ought not to be lightly passed over. The phrase "Matthew's Parables" would have had a different meaning. It would have confined our attention to those parables peculiarly Matthew's and would have made our inquiry an inquiry chiefly into the evangelist's mind. The title chosen is broader than the one suggested. It takes in all the parables in the First Gospel and everything connected with them. The meaning of our title might be elaborated thus:- The primary purpose of this paper is to get at that portion of the teaching of Jesus in the parables recorded by Matthew. The secondary purpose is to learn what are the peculiarities of Mt which show themselves in the parables. This secondary purpose is incidental to our first purpose. It really gives us the method to be used, namely that of comparison. Many works devoted to the present subject have not pursued this method. But in scholarly circles today the approved method is not to lump the four gospels together and treat them indiscriminately but to have regard to the individuality of each account and thereby arrive at a more correct view of the truth presented. We want to get at Jesus, particularly at the parabolic teaching of Jesus. In order to do that we must study the reporters of Jesus comparatively. In this case we are con-

cerned with one of them, Mt; with the help of the other reporters we desire to get a correct estimate of him, so that we may have a more exact understanding of our Lord.

An exact definition of a parable is not necessary to our study. It would indeed be convenient were we able to say exactly what sayings are to be regarded as parables and what not. But this can hardly be done. At least not all scholars would agree in every instance. Many sayings have a parabolic character, but opinion would differ as to the propriety of calling them parables. Suffice it to say that parables are those sayings which are quite generally conceded to be properly so called. Practically it makes no difference that many short sayings are at one time called parables and at another time proverbs or merely logia. Our study can go forward independently of exact definitions and statistics.

Looking at the parabolic teaching in a general way we can notice several outstanding differences between Mt and his fellow reporters, Mk and Lk# Roughly speaking our Lord has left us from 30 to 35 parables. Two-thirds of these are preserved for us by Lk. Mt has only one-half of them. In this respect of quantity little attention need be paid to Mk, since he does not aim to give much of Jesus teaching. Perhaps the reason why Lk surpasses

#The word parable(παραβολή) does not occur in John, neither can any parables in the strict and narrow sense of the word be said to occur in the Fourth Evangelist.

Mt in the richness of the parabolic material is that he aimed at completeness; yet we cannot be sure that Mt did not have the same aim but with less extensive resources. Another general difference to be noted concerns Jesus' purpose in the use of parables. Following is Jesus' explicit statement according to Mt with the variant accounts:

Mt	Mk	Lk
Therefore I speak unto them in parables; because seeing they see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And unto them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear etc.	Unto you is given the mystery of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all things are done in parables: that seeing they may see and not perceive; and hearing they may hear and not understand; lest haply they should turn again, and it should be forgiven them. (page 56 in Huck)	Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to the rest in parables; that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.

Mk and Lk gives us a little trouble here which Mt does not. According to them Jesus spoke in parables in order to produce spiritual blindness. However the disciples understood this, we must take it as "sad irony". We cannot suppose that our Lord intended to blind people. He must have been stating in strong terms the result and not the purpose of his parabolic teaching. Mt on the other hand does not necessitate any such explanation as this. According to him Jesus says that he uses parables because of the condition of his hearers. The meaning seems to be that plain literal speech would be misunderstood as well

in some cases not understood. But it must not be supposed that Mt's version is entirely without difficulty. It lacks the clearness belonging to Mk and Lk. Perhaps the canons of criticism would compel us to take the report of Mk and Lk as correct and Mt's as edited, since the more difficult of two versions is likely to be the correct one. But however that may be, the passage gives us what Mt regarded as a purpose of the parables. Maybe he would have us understand that it was the purpose of the use of parables. But nothing prevents us judging from the parables themselves. We are at liberty to to make us of all available evidence. We can draw inferences from the data presented to us by the Evangelist as well as he can. A study of the parables in Mt leads us to the same conclusion of the question of purpose as does a study of the parables in the other two gospels. Jesus used parables to make his meaning clear and to adapt his truth to the understanding and general mental life of his hearers, to win a hearing for a sometimes unpalatable truth or an otherwise unheeded truth, to lodge his truth in the minds of men and perhaps in some instances to convey truth to willing hearers in the midst of a hostile environment. Still another general observation concerns the distribution, or better, the grouping of the parables in the gospel. Even the casual reader notices that Mt places the parables in groups, though of course some are isolated. In chapter I3 there are 7 parables.

in chapters 20, 21, [illegible], there are 4. In chapters 24 and 25 there are 5. But perhaps we ought not to charge all this grouping to Mt. Jesus may have uttered several parables on one occasion. Public speakers do not always content themselves with just one illustration. Moreover whenever the word παραβολή, as Meyer points out, is used technically it is almost invariably used in the plural. Here it is well to observe that the classification of the parables upon which much attention has been bestowed is not a matter of the highest importance. Evidently the early christians appreciated the parables without any such classifications as those of modern times. Classifications are as a rule merely conveniences for the sake of treatment and may minister more to the sense of symetry than aught else. It seems best to study the parables about as they are given us by the evangelists.

Leaving these general matters of quantity, purpose and arrangement, look at those parables which Mt has in common with Lk but not with Mk. There are 8 of them:-

Page in Huck 47 Two Foundations. Mt 7:24-27 Lk 6:47-49.

51 The Children in the Market Place. Mt 11:16-19. Lk 7:31-35.

59 The Leaven Mt 13: 33 Lk 13:20-21.

97 The Lost Sheep Mt 18:10-14. Lk 15:1-10.

124 The Marriage Feast and The Slighted Invitation Mt 22:1-14 Lk 14:15-24.

141 The Good Man and the Thief. Mt 24:42-44 Lk 12:[illegible]

142 The Unfaithful Upper Servant 31-46 Mt 24:45-51 Lk 12:41-48.

I45 The Talents Mt 25:I4-3I Lk I9: II-27.

It is the rule rather than the exception that Mt has a different setting for almost every one of these than has Lk. The exceptions are the first two parables. The "Two Foundations" and "The Children Playing in the Market Place" in both gospels are placed respectively at the close of the Sermon on the Mount and in Jesus' estimate of John the Baptist.

As to verbal differences the following may be said:- In the "Two Foundations" there is very little similarity of language. The "Children In The Market Place" in Mt follows much the same order of words as in Lk, but there is a an interchange of synonyms and tenses. For instance

Mt	Lk
16 τὴν γενεὰν ταύτην	τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τῆς γενεᾶς ταύτης.
ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς	ἐν ἀγορᾷ
18 ἦλθεν	ἐλήλυθεν

Practically no verbal differences are to noted in the "Leaven"/ In the parable of the "Lost Sheep" a very striking difference occurs. According to Lk the sheep is lost (ἀπολωλός), while in Mt the sheep has strayed (πλανώμενον). Hardly less significant is the difference in the expression of time in the parable of the "goodman and The Thief". Mt says ποίᾳ φυλακῇ while Lk says ποίᾳ ὥρᾳ.

The "Unfaithful Upper Servant " in Lk contains two verses not found in Mt' account. Lk animadverts on the relation of knowledge and ignorance of duty in relation to punishment. There is no excuse for ignorance but ignorance of duty

justifies a mitigation of punishment. "And that servant who knew his lord's will and made not ready, nor did accordi ng to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes; but he that knew not and did things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes". A thought about responsibility varying with opportunity is added doubtless as another form of the thought just given, though it does not exactly correspond. The verbal differences in the parable of "The Marriage Feast and The Slighted Invitation" as given repectively by Mt and Lk are so marked as to suggest to many that we have here two distinct parables. I do not take up the question but simply accept the judgment of Huck's Synopse which places the two accounts side by side under the title "The Messianic Feast". T The following differences should be noted:-

Mt	Lk.
A certain king who made a marriage feast for his son.	A certain man made a great supper;
The invited guests not only slight and ridicule but also maltreat and kill the servants sent to summon them.	The guests merely make ridiculous excuses.
The episode of the man without the wedding garment is related.	No suggestion of this episode.
The episode seems to contain the additional lesson that some of those who attend the feast will be ejected; that is some who accept the invitation will be found unfit or not ready.	The parable has but the one point of the indifference of the privileged and the appreciation of the needy.

As great differences meet us when we come to deal with the parable of the Talents, here again some maintain that we have two distinct parables, but here again we defer to the judgment represented in Huck's Synopse and regard them as two versions of the same parable. Let us notice the following differences:-

Mt	Lk
For it is as when a man going into another country called his own servants and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one each according to his several ability; and he went on his journey.	A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return, and he called ten servants and gave them ten pounds, and said unto them, Trade ye herewith till I come.
The servants trade with varying success.	The servants trade with the same success: each doubles his endowment.

The verbal differences in the narrative of the slothful servant do not change the moral lesson that indolence is inexcusable.

"Equal diligence in the use of unequal endowments equally rewarded in the divine kingdom"	"Unequal diligence in the use of equal endowments unequally rewarded"

What is the significance of all these differences in the two accounts dealing with the same material? What inferences may we draw from them regarding the parables in Mt? Four inferences may be drawn:-

I Neither Mt nor his fellow evangelist was a stickler for verbal exactness. The many minor differences in vocabulary etc. are proof of this. The gospel writers did not claim or care

to be verbatim reporters. Some freedom seems to have been used with the language. Hence we must not insist that in every case we have the ipsissima verba.

2. Mt's parables are adapted to Jewish readers. This is apparent enough from the phraseology. φυλακῇ is a Jewish division of time whereas ὥρᾳ (Lk) is Roman. But the Jewish standpoint comes out in many details. The parable of the "Slighted Invitation" speaks of a certain king making a feast for his son, readily suggestive of the messianic hope to the Jew. The two classes of people most in Mt's mind are believing and non-believing Jews, while Lk thinks more of Jews and Gentiles. And quite generally the truth brought out in Lk's parables is of wider and less national application.

3. It follows naturally from the Jewish adaptation of Mt's parables that the eschatalogical note is strong. In Lk the "Two Foundations" has reference to the distinction between doing and not doing solely, whereas in Mt the parable has a very distinct eschatalogical coloring, as appears from the context. The basis for this inference is broader than the grounds here given. That basis will be seen in some of the parables that remain to be treated.

4. A fourth inference and one in line particularly with the last two is that there is in Mt's parables a very strong note of severity. Not that this is entirely lacking in Lk but that it is emphasized in Mt.

In the parable of the "Lost Sheep" Lk thinks of the emotion with which God regards the sinner. God loses the sinner. But Mt on the other hand having in mind the responsibility of the Jewish sinner speaks of him as a strayed sheep. The guests in "The Messianic Feast", who are the Jews, are represented as beating and killing their host's servants; in Lk they only present flimsy excuses. Take again the "Two Foundations". The severity of Mt is apparent from the following comparison:-

Mt	Lk
the rain descended, floods came and the winds blew, and beat upon that house.	when a flood arose, the stream brake against that house,
the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and smote upon that house;	against which the stream brake and straightway it fell in.

These inferences, it will be noticed, are based on the parables in Mt which have parallels in Lk but not in Mk. Those parables which Mt has in common with both Mk and Lk, while they do not confirm our inferences yet do not contradict them. It would seem that the more common the material, the less do Matthean features appear. The parables referred to are:-

Page in Huck28 The Children of The Bride Chamber.

The New Patch On The Worn Garment.

The New Wine in The Old Skins.
Mt 9:14-17. Mk 2:18-22. Lk 5:33-39.

55 The Sower or The Soils. Mt 13:1-23;
Mk 4:1-9. Lk 8:4-8.
59 The Mustard Seed Mt 13:31-32; Mk 4:30-32:
Lk13:18-19.
122 The Wicked Husbandmen Mt 21:33-41;
Mk 12:1-2: Lk 20:9-19.
139 The Fig Tree Mt 24:32; Mk13:28-29; Lk21;29-31.

The parables, however, peculiar to Mt furnish us with evidence strongly confirmatory of our inferences. They are:-

38 The Tares Mt 13 24-30.

61 The Hid Treasure. Mt 13:44

61 The Pearl Of Great Price / Mt 13:45-46.

61 The Drag Net Mt 13 :47.

99 The Unmerciful Servant Mt 18:23-35.
99
109 The Laborers in the Vinyard Mt 20:1-16.

119 The Two Sons Mt 21:28-31.

143 The Ten Virgins Mt 25 :1-13.

148 The Judgment or The Sheep and The Goats
Mt 25: 31-46.

Only two of these peculiar parables lack the note of severity, namely "The Hid Treasure," and the "Pearl of Great Price". The idea of a judgment comes out in all the others. The eschatalogical idea is found in at least 4 of them. We have to confess that the Jewish nation is not foremost if at all present in these parables. The evangelist does not have in mind the division of the Jews into believers and non-believers; nor does he think of the Jews and Gentiles as the contrasted classes. The Church has the main place. These might be called parables of the Church,

with a few exceptions. The division in Mt's mind in them is between the true and untrue followers of Christ. Perhaps this ought to be added to our list of inferences about the parables in Mt:- Mt gives more prominence than any other evangelist to the society of Christians, or more simply, the Church. It need hardly be added that it is not ecclesiastically but spiritually that the Church is thought of.

The parables omitted by Mt have some bearing on our subject. We would like to know certainly whether Mt had before him when he wrote any of the parables peculiar to Lk and so whether he deliberately omitted them. Why did not Mt preserve for us"The Prodigal Son","The Rich Man and Lazarus","The Pharisee and The Publican","The Good Samaritan"? We do not know. If he knew of them, then we may judge that they were not exactly suited to his purpose. Though they have some severity in them, they are predominantly parables of compassion. If Mt did not know them, then we have to ask why all those peculiar to Lk should be marked by the spirit of mercy and those peculiar to Mt marked by the spirit of severity. It seems incredible that Mt and Lk should just happen to be familiar with parables in just this way. Can we not say that there is selection here? It looks very much as though there was a fund of parables from which Mt and Lk selected such as

were in harmony with their prevailing spirit. If this is so, we have still further evidence on the point of Mt's individuality.

The discussion now brings us to the crucial question: Are these peculiarities in the parables found in Mt to be traced wholly to the evangelist or do they represent a true aspect of the teaching of Jesus? Must we discount these parables to get the truth as it came from Jesus' lips? or are we to take them at their face value? Reference to the other gospels helps to solve the problem. When we study Mk and Lk, we see that they do not contradict Mt in every case. We find in them (it may sound paradoxical) Mt's peculiarities. Mt does not have an exclusive claim to the truths so prominent in his parables. Mt's peculiarity lies not so much in his meaning as in his emphasis. In a rough way we may illustrate the differnce between Mt, Mk and Lk by reference to musical interpretation. Let three pianists take the same musical composition. Each one renders it in a different way. Each one makes you hear something more distinctly or differently than does either of his fellows. Yet the musical composition has but one composer. Each one of the players may be true as far as he goes. No player may bring out all there is in the piece, but we are thankful for the different interpretations: we thereby gain greater insight into the

value of the composition. This, I say, in a general way illustrates the difference between Mt's parabolic teaching and that of the others. I need not go into details; everyone knows that there are national, severe, eschatalogical and discipleship parables and parts of parables in the other two gospels. The thing to remember is that neither of the other two evangelists gives the same emphsis to these things as does our First Evangelist.

The practical conclusion from this whole matter for the everyday Christian and for the Christian teacher is very plain. It has reference not only to the parables but in fact to all connected with the life and teaching of Christ. Discover the individuality of the gospel writer; see that that individuality does not in the large detract from the fidelity of his report but emphasizes an aspect that might otherwise escape your attention. Remember too that you get only a limited though true view of Jesus' thought from each evangelist. When you are reading Mt, you must never forget that you are reading Mt and that only as you consider the other evangelists in the same manner will you approximate to a complete view of our Lord. Each is but a broken light. Christ is more than each, indeed more than all together. In applying these general thoughts to the parables in Mt you will learn and will in your study need always to bear in mind the five facts which this paper has endeavored to make clear:-

1. We have not in every case an exact verbatim report.
2. The parables in Mt are adapted primarily to Jewish readers.
3. The eschatalogical note is prominent.
4. Many of them are exceedingly severe in tone.
5. A number of them relate to the church on its spiritual side.

When these facts are clearly apprehended and applied, you will see that in the parables Mt makes a decided and distinctive contribution to our knowledge and love of him who is our guide in all spiritual things.

April 10, 1907. Stanley Brand